


Eco-spirituality as a Response to Climate Change in Nigeria

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to propose eco-spirituality as a remedy to the challenge of climate change. Climate change is primarily caused by human beings. Therefore, to tackle this problem it is important to change the lifestyle of humans. This change in lifestyle is already described in a concept known as eco-spirituality, which is the awareness that human activities impact other inhabitants of the universe. The problem is that some people in Nigeria are ignorant of eco-spirituality and some individuals who possess the knowledge do not put it into practice. This research is based on the theoretical framework of eco-spirituality. The qualitative research method was employed to explore how change of human lifestyle can alleviate the impacts of climate change. The researcher utilized the descriptive method of analysis to interpret the data gathered from secondary sources, such as books and online scholarly articles. The research findings demonstrate that an adequate awareness of the interconnectedness between human beings and other components of the ecosystem should result in a change in lifestyle that will decrease the human activities that exacerbate climate change.

Keyword: Eco-spirituality, Ecosystem, Climate change, Lifestyle

Introduction

Climate change is principally a human-made problem. Human beings are at the origin of climatic change and crisis. Ninety seven percent of scientists say that human beings are the causes of global warming (Ocko, 2024). A document released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2007 reiterated the damaging impact of human-induced climate change on the environment (IPCC, 2007:9). Scholars have expressed similar idea in diverse ways. For instance, Gnanakan (2008) argues that centuries of uncontrolled exploitation have devastated life on planet Earth. Some of the human activities that have consistently degraded and polluted the environment include deforestation, burning of fossil fuel, soil-unfriendly farming practices such as use of fertilizers, pesticides, overgrazing, monoculture, indiscriminate waste disposal, and the like. The aforementioned human practices have led to desertification, pollution of water bodies, the surge in the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, flooding, depletion of soil nutrients and increase of greenhouse gases. These negative effects of human activities threaten the lives of human beings and other components of the ecosystem. Hence, there is an urgent need to act quickly and take care of the problem.

The current lifestyle of human beings is the root cause of the problem. How human beings live today has left many destructive traces on the environment. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis dedicated a whole chapter to the change of life style of human beings. Pope Saint John Paul II in his message on climate crisis dedicated a portion of it to change of lifestyle. There are many ecological movements and government policies in different parts of the globe sensitizing people on the need of a change of life style in the fight against climate change. Ghana and Sierra Leone have implemented tree planting policies, while Rwanda has enforced a complete ban on plastic use. Nigeria lacks substantial legislative action to mitigate the climate change crisis. The clean-up of oil spillage in Niger Delta is progressing at a sluggish pace. The data released by National Oil Spill Detection and Regulatory Agency (NOSDRA) reveals oil companies cleaned up only 2.19% of 172,000 barrels spilled in 5 years. The information from NOSDRA indicates that out of the 47 oil companies, only Shell, Agip, Chevron, and Seplat participated in the clean-up activities. The remaining 43 companies did not show any indication of cleaning up their oil spills at all (Mba, 2021). The illegal mining is still ongoing. Logging is full scale in many states. Erosion is having the field of the day in many parts of the country. The National Orientation Agency is supposed to be carrying out public enlightenment campaign across the country. The agency needs to be up and doing in mobilizing the citizens for participation in national and global issues like climate change.

Qualitative research methodology was utilized in the study to explore the phenomenon of climate change and suggest change of lifestyle as an effective approach to addressing it. Data were collected from secondary sources, such as online journals and scholarly articles. The goal of this paper is to acknowledge, just as many experts have said, that climate change is primarily caused by human beings, and to propose a change in lifestyle as the way out. This change of lifestyle is referred as eco-spirituality. It is the consciousness of human beings that their actions impact on other inhabitants of the universe (Van Schalkwyk, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

To effectively tackle the issue of climate change there is need for a change of lifestyle. This change of lifestyle is already encapsulated in what is known today as eco-spirituality. Traditional eco-spirituality has been practiced by indigenous peoples for centuries, with roots dating back to St Francis of Assisi, who expressed his devotion to God through his love for all of God's creation. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Jesuit, advocated for revering the planet and believed in the divinity within every particle of life. He also emphasized humanity's place as part of a divine whole, rather than at the centre of the universe. Thomas Berry, a prominent eco-theologian and Passionist priest, focused on the relationship between humanity and the Earth in the twentieth century. He emphasized the importance of understanding and respecting the interconnectedness between humans and the planet. Berry's teachings continue to inspire environmentalists and theologians to this day (Brady, 2022). A lot has been written about eco-spirituality but some people are still ignorant of it, while others who know about it have not lived it out fully in such a way as to make meaningful impact in the relationship with the environment.

Advocates of eco-spirituality originate from a wide range of backgrounds, yet despite varying approaches and motivations, they collectively uphold several fundamental values. Central to their beliefs is the critical importance of cultivating an understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. Eco-spirituality tries to correct the impression that the focal attention in creation should be only on human beings. It creates the awareness that the ecosystem is made up of human life and other animals, plants and other non-human inhabitants of the world. It proposes a symbiotic relationship between human beings and the other components of the ecosystem so as to foster care, protection and safeguard of every aspect of the ecosystem. In order to achieve its goal, eco-spirituality recommends certain positive actions that are environment-friendly and discourages activities that are inimical to the ecosystem. The study is based on the eco-spirituality principles derived from the teachings of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* and *Laudate Deum*. The documents emphasize the importance of human beings changing their lifestyle as a significant measure in tackling the issue of climate change.

Review of major documents on Climate Change

Climate change is the increased manifestation of weather conditions caused by anthropogenic (human beings) and natural causes (Okonkwo, 2023). The increased weather conditions are noticeable in the unusual high temperatures, severe floods, protracted drought, wildfires in some parts of the world, and the like. Although there are natural causes of climate change, the anthropogenic cause has left colossal negative trace on the environment. It is the desire to checkmate the human-driven activities that impact on the environment that the global community meets annually. One of such meetings is the Conference of Parties. The first Conference of Parties (COP) took place in Berlin, Germany, in 1995. Subsequently, COP 28 was conducted in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, in 2023. The next Conference of Parties (COP 29) is planned for November 11 to November 24, 2024, in Baku, Azerbaijan. The researcher will analyze the critical components of the agreement that was reached at COP 21 in Paris, France, in 2015.

(a) Paris Agreement on Climate Change: There have been global efforts to combat the problem of climate change. In 2015, world leaders gathered in Paris under the aegis of COP 21 to discuss ways to curb the menace of climate change. The Paris Agreement was a landmark document

where the world spoke with one voice on climate change. The Paris Agreement was ratified by 196 countries (UNFCCC, 2021). The responsibility of executing the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), signed in 1992 and effective from 1994, was assigned to the Paris Agreement (Radschinski, 2017:1). The Paris Agreement revolves around three pillars. They include mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damages. Every party to the Agreement is expected to put in place measures that can mitigate the effects of climate change. Such measures include the halting of the use of fossil fuels which is one of the major generators of greenhouse gases which cause climate change. Adaptation has to do with measures taken by human beings to help them cope with adverse weather conditions such as flood, high temperatures and the like. Developed countries were asked to make some financial contributions that will be used to help developing countries implement actions aimed at either adaptation or mitigation of climate change (UNFCCC, 2016). All the measures to check climate change which the Paris Agreement stipulated bordered on a change of lifestyle of human beings. The major problem is that most governments, institutions, individuals and companies are more interested in safeguarding their interests and the financial benefits they derive from the use of certain forms of energy that disrupts the ecosystem than the overall common good of protection of life on the planet. The change of lifestyle entails a paradigm shift from too much attention on the interest of a handful of human beings to concern for the wellbeing of human beings and other living and non-living components of the ecosystem. This demands a lot of sacrifice which most of those perpetrators of this crime against the environment are not willing to make. Much has been said, but adequate action to bring about the desired change is lacking. This is the case with Paris Agreement.

COP 28 took place in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where the international community assembled from November 30, 2023 to December 13, 2023 to fulfil the annual obligation of meeting to discuss the problem of climate change. The Conference brought together many participants comprising heads of state, representatives of government and non-governmental institutions from across the globe. The Conference was remarkable in that it marked the conclusion of the first global 'stocktake' (assessment of areas of progress) since the Paris Agreement. It was observed that there was slow progress in certain areas such as reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, financial support of vulnerable countries, and strengthening resilience to climate change. Countries were challenged to make efforts to switch from the use of fossil fuels to other renewable energies like wind and solar (UNFCCC, 2024).

After the Global Stocktake (GST) on the progress made in the climate change, the committee made recommendations moving forward. The recommendations bordered on how to attain mitigation goals, adaptation goals and implementation and financial goals. The mitigation goals are supposed to help reduce the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. This will entail putting a stop to deforestation and using more renewable sources of energy other than fossil fuels. In other for the adaptation goals to be attained, it would be important to encourage and finance projects that would help local and regional communities to cope with drought, flood and other effects of climate change. In this regard there are calls for fulfilment of financial commitment of major contributions to climate change. The fourth goal underscores the need of disbursement of the funds to help developing countries battling with the effect of climate to carry out activities and actions that will help to facilitate the attainment of the mitigation and adaptation goals of climate change (UNFCCC, 2023). The recommendations are all pointing to a change of lifestyle.

The western countries are expected to compensate the developing countries who are suffering because of the damages. But money is given to take care of the damages and the activities that caused the loss are still going on, then what is the need. It is a change of lifestyle that will make more impact. The several meetings of COP seem to have achieved less when compared to the results that will come with a change of lifestyle. But there are groups and institutions that are already making sincere efforts to achieve this objective. In compliance with the UN policy of rotating the presidency of COP, and based on the fact that it was the turn of eastern Europe to host the next COP, Azerbaijan was chosen as the venue for COP29 (Abnett and Volcovici, 2023). Baku in Azerbaijan, the city that will play host to the world summit is said to be the city where one of the earliest oil fields in the world was established 1,200 years ago (Borenstein, 2023).

(b) Eco-spirituality in some Papal documents: The Church cannot stand aloof to the global ecological crisis that has unleashed untold sufferings on human beings and other inhabitants of the universe. Sheerwood (1987) rightly points out that Church leaders worldwide should encourage their members to embrace ecological action that would help to safeguard the environment. The inaugural plenary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria on February 15, 2023 marked the commencement of a national Catholic tree-planting initiative. The campaign's objective is to plant 5.5 million trees within the next five years in order to combat climate change (Benjamin, 2023). The planting of trees is a part of eco-spirituality which aims at protecting the environment and reducing the quantity of carbon-dioxide in the atmosphere. Tree planting is good, but it will not do much good if people are not sensitized enough on its importance and the practices to imbibe to safeguard plants and trees in the environment. The Churches in Nigeria should educate their members on healthy environmental practices.

The concept of eco-spirituality gained prominence in the Roman Catholic Church, especially through apostolic letters and papal encyclicals. In 1971, Pope Paul VI made a reference to climate change by using the term 'transformation,' which he characterized as "...an ill-exploitation of nature...the dramatic and unexpected consequence of human activity" (par.21). Pope Saint John Paul II's 1990 World Day of Peace Message emphasized the necessity for modern society to address its lifestyle in order to find a solution to the ecological problem. He highlighted the negative impact of instant gratification and consumerism, urging individuals to be more mindful of the damage caused. Additionally, he stressed the importance of moderation, discipline, and a spirit of sacrifice as essential components of a new ecological lifestyle (par.13). In his address for the World Day of Peace, Pope Benedict XVI emphatically asserts that the problem of environmental degradation compels humanity to reflect on their way of life. This requires a collective and responsible endeavour to transcend self-serving nationalistic interests and adopt a perspective that remains attuned to the needs of all nations (Par. 11, 14).

The Catholic Church's role in addressing climate change was further emphasized with the publication of the encyclical *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis in 2015. In *Laudato Si*, the Pope is simply inviting the global community to ecological conversion (par. 218) which entails a change from former ways of relating with the environment which has been catastrophic to a new way of relating with the entire creation which is life giving. This change of lifestyle entails awareness that we share the earth which he calls our common home with other creatures. This awareness will foster an attitude of care and self-sacrifice and good works (par. 202, 220). The Pope said it is not just going back to the past but to adapt the values there that can help

people today in the fight against climate change. Pope Francis took time to list what we can do. They include putting off the lights when not in use, not wasting water, picking up a paper lying on the floor. Putting dirt in the drainage is a bad habit that needs to be eschewed. The Pope also spoke of environmental racism, which is taking dirt from one neighbourhood to another one. People will have to change. It is imperative. We have no other option than to save this world. Everybody is involved it is time for action. What is being said about eco-spirituality is not something new. It is something that is old, and is getting lost.

Following an interval of eight years since the publication of *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis presented *Laudate Deum*. The Pope did not mince words in naming human beings as being at the origin of climate change (par. 11). The Pope suggests a healthy interaction between human beings and the environment (par. 27). In reference to the numerous conferences, the Pope remarked that the agreements have been inadequately executed, primarily due to the absence of effective mechanisms for oversight, regular assessment, and sanctions for noncompliance. He emphasized that international negotiations are hindered by the stances adopted by nations that prioritize their own interests over the collective welfare of the global community (par.52). The Pope is saying that the institutions that the world put in place to fight climate change have failed. The world must look up for an alternative which entails a change of lifestyle.

Climate Change in Nigeria

Nigeria has experienced notable shifts in its climate, characterized by higher temperatures, unpredictable precipitation, rising sea levels leading to flooding, desertification, land degradation, and more frequent extreme weather occurrences, and the depletion of freshwater resources and biodiversity. Additionally, there has been an escalation in the duration and strength of rainfall, leading to significant runoffs and widespread flooding in numerous areas of the country (Haider, 2019). The National Emergency Agency (NEMA) has reported that more than 500,000 people have been displaced by flooding in the country in 2022 (Durodola, 2022). A heavy downpour on Wednesday, July 4, 2024, caused flooding and severe traffic congestion throughout Lagos State (Oyedokun, July 3, 2024). The intense rainfall resulted in severe flooding in multiple parts of the state, leaving travellers stranded and impacting numerous roads and communities. The heavy rain submerged vehicles and inundated homes of residents in the affected neighbourhoods throughout the state (Ehigiator, July 15, 2024). Environmental expert Michael Simire emphasized the impact of poor drainage due to refuse dumping and buildings along drainage channels in Lagos. He urged the government to clear and maintain drainage channels to prevent flooding in neighbourhoods (Akoni, Adegboye, & Onodjae, July 15, 2024).

Key human activities that are driving climate change in Nigeria include the emission of greenhouse gases from vehicles, the burning of hydrocarbon products, deforestation, and emissions from industrial processes. The impact of climate change is evident in disrupted crop distribution and reduced production levels due to excessive rain and drought. Moreover, the prevalence of diseases like malaria is exacerbated by climate change, as mosquitoes breed in stagnant waters.

The effective mitigation of climate change in Nigeria necessitates collective action. It is imperative for the Federal government to collaborate with stakeholders across different ministries in order to guarantee the implementation of policies that are informed by pertinent data and address present environmental issues. Additionally, legislative bodies must enact laws to forbid activities that have a detrimental impact on the ozone layer. It is essential to

utilize mass media platforms for public awareness campaigns in order to educate the Nigerian population about the detrimental effects of their actions on the environment. Moreover, educators should integrate environmental education into school curricula to empower students with knowledge about climate change and their role in addressing it (FutureLearn, 2021). It is incumbent upon all individuals to change behaviors that exacerbate climate change and embrace practices that support environmental conservation. This is the essence of eco-spirituality.

Eco-spirituality in Ecological movements and African Societies

There is the danger of restricting eco-spirituality to the realm of theoretical knowledge where people acquire information about eco-spirituality but their lives are not transformed by the knowledge they have acquired. For eco-spirituality to be effective, it has to lead to positive change in the relationship between human beings and their environment. Many ecological movements have emerged in response to the clarion call to safeguard the earth. Even before the emergence of such movements, eco-spirituality was already being practised in some cultures in Nigeria. The African model of the practice of eco-spirituality will be explored alongside the ecological movements across the globe. .

(i) Ecological movements: There are many groups that have been founded to promote a lifestyle that is environment friendly. The goal of such group is to imbibe certain values that will enable the members to change certain behaviours that cause damage to the environment. There are also practices that members are invited to carry out in order to support life on the planet. One of such movements is *Laudato Si* that emerged in response to Pope Francis' encyclical. The group creates awareness of the need of adopting a way of life that respects different components of the eco system. There are many ecological movements in Nigeria. One of them is the Purple Hands Empowerment Initiative founded in 2016 by Brenda Max-Nduaguibe. One of its initiatives is massive tree planting exercises in different locations in Abuja, Nigeria. It is making impact in the areas its outreach is felt. If such movements could be extended to every part of the country, the goal of educating the public will be achieved and more people will embrace the goals of the ecological movement. It is important to note that membership of such groups is usually based on individual conviction and decision to respond to an urgent call to save the planet and its inhabitants from the disaster of ecological crisis caused by human beings.

(ii) Eco-spirituality in some Nigerian cultures: The traditional African eco-spirituality has been an integral part of the African traditional way of life. It is based on the presence of 'the sacred' in the entire creation. Laws and taboos are put in place to instil sense of reverence and respect for the natural world and protection of the environment. Eco-spirituality is not something new. It is as old as our ancestors. That is why some communities in Igbo land do not kill a species of snake called *eke* in Igbo language; some do not kill *mbe* (tortoise). These are consciousness of respecting nature. When a portion of land is cultivated for one year it is left fallow before it is cultivated again. These are to help the earth to rest. Tubi (2020:118) explains what he calls the Yoruba people's expression of eco-spirituality. He states that the Yoruba eco-spirituality is concretely expressed by the implementation of particular *eewo* (taboos) is intended to protect the environment and promote the continuity of life. A prime example of this is the restriction on the killing of fish in ponds that are vital sources of water in arid periods. Furthermore, it is deemed unacceptable to intentionally slay an animal that is nursing its offspring.

The practise of eco-spirituality is also evident among the Tiv people. According to Abya (2005), it is forbidden to harm or kill the green

snake, *ikyarem*. In the event of accidental death or discovery of the snake's demise, it is given a respectful burial. In the same vein, Afaor and Amah (2020) used the responses to Orbunde, Tondo, and Terkaa (participants of a survey he conducted) to affirm the fact that the Tiv forbid indiscriminate felling of trees, entrance to certain forests, and bush burning. Some trees, animals and various rivers and mountains are used as sacraments of divinities. As mentioned by Amase, one of those the authors interviewed, this action was implemented to prevent the burning of medicinal plants and the destruction of animal habitats.

Unfortunately, however, this African eco-spirituality appears lost today in the continent, due to the impacts of the materialistic, capitalist and consumerist world economy, which simply ravages the resources of the earth. Hedonism is also a big obstacle to eco-spirituality. Someone has shoes already, but buys another because he or she saw the advert 'buy one and get two free.' This lifestyle is weighing on nature because those raw materials are got from nature. Poverty is a major challenge facing nanny African countries. How can you tell someone not to kill a monkey when that person is hungry? These are all obstacles to full realization of eco-spirituality.

There is need for enlightenment of people so that they may know the consequences of their lifestyle. For example, people should be informed that if they cut down trees because they need firewood, and did it many times, the air they breathe will no longer be pure because the trees make us breathe clean air by taking away carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. They could also be told to plant two trees when they cut down one. The government has a role to play in this effort to protect the environment. That role has to do with formulation of policies and enactment of laws that protect certain endangered species, water bodies, forests and the environment. The provision of certain basic amenities could also help to check certain human behaviours such as indiscriminate refuse dumping and open defecation and urination. The change of human lifestyle remains an effective way of addressing the problem of climate change. This change of lifestyle is expected of every individual, community, and government.

Conclusion

Climate change has been a problem that has occupied the minds of the global community due to the palpable negative damages it has caused to living and non-living things and the disharmony it has injected into the ecosystem. Human and non-human factors have been adduced as being responsible for climate change. But a closer look at the problem reveals that the activities of the human beings are the major contributing factors to climate change. These human activities include the use of fossil fuels which increase greenhouse effect, deforestation which can cause desertification and increase in the quantity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, gas flaring which has negative effects on human health, and the likes. There have been calls for these destructive human activities to be minimized and possibly stopped. But, these calls are not yielding adequate results. Hence, slow progress is made in dealing with climate change. Yet, each year world leaders and big companies meet to discuss climate change. Despite these yearly meetings and the decisions taken at such meetings, there is little compliance with the decisions reached and less effort to fulfil obligations and commitments in the fight against climate change. This is due to the fact that some nations and companies who are the major culprits of the abuse of the environment are not ready to abandon activities which create wealth for them.

The truth is that it is only a change of lifestyle that will make a huge impact in the fight against climate change. This change of lifestyle entails an awareness that the earth belongs to human beings, plants, animals and other components of the ecosystem. This change of

lifestyle is the major preoccupation of eco-spirituality. This awareness will lead to respect for every aspect of the ecosystem. This way of life has been practised in some traditional societies and has borne fruits of preservation of some rare species of plants and animals and protection of the environment. These values have been eroded by industrialization and materialistic tendencies that have inundated the society. This paper calls for a reawakening of this value which has almost been forgotten or least practised. In the fight against climate change, progress will be made when human beings are ready to stop activities that endanger other components of the ecosystem. The church, government and communities can help to foster this way of life through sensitization and strict implementation of global and national policies that can check human activities that cause gigantic damage to the ecosystem.

Conflict interest(s)

The authors declare that they has no personal, professional or financial interest that may have inappropriately influenced the outcome of this research.

Ethical considerations

The authors declare that this article was conducted in accordance with ethical standards and principles for research.

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